

Why Priests Stay in the Priesthood

By DR. J. J. MURPHY

(The substance of an address requested by many, as delivered three times, Sunday evening, October 4th, 1942, successively in Greenway Hall, the Lecture Hall, and the Main Auditorium of Jarvis Street Baptist Church, Toronto, to an aggregate of more than three thousand people.)

Prison bars do not keep Roman Catholic priests in the priesthood. American priests are free citizens of a free country. No physical force or State law prevents them from giving up the priesthood.

People at large realize these facts. But that is exactly the reason they are baffled. They have noticed that many priests lead uninspired lives, that they are much more devoted to their personal well-being and enjoyment than to the interests of religion. And yet such priests, more or less devoid of spiritual motives, continue to stay in the priesthood, even though obliged to disguise their real interests and lead an unnatural life deprived of the normal satisfactions of a home and family. What is the explanation?

It is well to note, in the first place, that many more priests resign from the priesthood than is generally realized. The public has been deceived by Catholic propaganda into believing that it is on the rarest of occasions that a priest ever leaves the priesthood and then only because he had been defrocked and expelled. The blunt fact is that seldom, if ever, is a priest forced to leave the priesthood. The Catholic church will cover up open scandals and even habitual moral laxities rather than lose one of its priests. Transfers, leaves of absence and many other subtle devices are resorted to as means of camouflaging the lapses of intemperate or immoral priests and inducing them to "remain in the fold." And usually this kind does remain.

The exact number of priests who leave the priesthood cannot be determined. This is because the vast majority of those who resign prefer to forget their disillusionment and lose themselves in the mass leading normal, workaday lives. Moreover, well-founded fears of economic persecution at the hands of the Catholic church make this a practical necessity.

Judging, however, by the hundreds of priests assisted at Christ's Mission and by the consensus of opinion among former priests, it would be a conservative estimate to say that about seventy-five priests leave the priesthood each year in the United States alone.

Just why the majority of priests cling to the priesthood is a complex of reasons—psychological, social and economic. Such reasonings and experiences have to be lived through to be appreciated in all their stark reality and emotional strain. None the less, I shall attempt to give here the principal and more tangible of these reasons.

Spiritual Reasons

The Catholic priest is so conditioned by one-sided training that he is convinced that the only alternative to Catholicism is rank unbelief. Protestantism is ridiculed out of consideration as a mere man-made religion now in the last stages of disintegration. Faced with this clean-cut choice, many a Catholic priest, who still believes in God and revelation but is thinking of leaving the church, recoils at the thought of atheism and chooses to remain

in Catholicism with all its abuses as the lesser of two evils.

Catholic doctrine forbids the conscientious priest to read anything that would endanger his faith or even cause doubts concerning it, under pain of eternal damnation. This leaves him mentally imprisoned behind the bars of religious prejudice—bars much stronger than those of a prison cell.

As for the unscrupulous priest, he prefers without hesitation the leisure and easy money of the priesthood to the economic struggle and privation that most ex-priests must suffer.

Catholicism is a vast mixture of beliefs and practices, natural, pagan and Christian. Within the church a person can practically work out a religion of his own, concentrating on the beliefs best suited to his preferences. The Catholic church, in practice if not in theory, is satisfied with exterior submission to its authority and discipline, plus formal assent to its specified dogmas. Priests realize this much better than the laity. Oftener than not they make up a Catholicism of their own: the pietistic priest concentrates on weird devotions; the liberal-minded priest disbelieves in everything but a few basic doctrines, which he admits because they are "infallibly" defined; the lax priest makes light of burdensome laws, such as that of celibacy, by persuading himself that they are mere church regulations, unmentioned in God's law, contrary to the law of nature and the practice of the apostles. In this way each priest makes the best of an uncomfortable situation to which he finds himself confined by social and economic barriers, which I shall later describe.

Psychological Reasons

Roman Catholicism, expert at mass-psychology, sows in the subconscious mind of little children fear complexes that few people are able to outgrow even in their mature years. This is as true of priests as of other people.

The young child is made to associate all that is good, noble and ideal, as well as tender memories, with his Catholic faith. He is taught that outside of the Catholic church he cannot be saved—that, no matter how bad he may become, he still can be saved if he keep his faith in the church. It is drilled into him that whoever attacks his faith is either ignorant or evil-intentioned, that no one can lose his faith in the church except through his own fault and that, if he does, he will be tortured in hell for all eternity.

The grandeur and pageantry of the century-old church, its vast libraries and intricate works on theology are used to overawe the individual to the point that he belittles himself in comparison with such a mighty institution, fears to pit his conviction against its voluminous learning and cringes at the thought of defying its threats and anathemas.

Social Reasons

More concrete and understandable are the social barriers to resignation from the priesthood. Imagine what

**SEND FOR EXTRA NUMBERS
OF THIS ISSUE**

it means to the priest to give up the priesthood; it means destroying the very framework of his life, the cultural pattern in which he has always lived. It means the sacrifice of a position of leadership and prestige, the breaking of ties with his own mother and father, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends. It means condemning them to shame and embarrassment, for every ex-priest is stigmatized by the Catholic church as a Judas Iscariot. It may, in many cases, also entail shock and untimely death for those who were nearest and dearest.

To the priest ostracized from the only world he has ever known, Protestantism seems strange and alien. Much of this feeling is the fruit of his own prejudice, but this does not make it less real or terrifying. It even happens at times that Protestants have fallen victims to Catholic propaganda so that they look askance at a former priest as if he were a phenomenon or a suspicious person.

Economic Reasons

The strongest reasons why priests stay in the priesthood are economic. In the priesthood the priest has a very comfortable life, practically as much leisure as he cares to create, money, a car and absolute social security. It would be unnatural for the priest not to contrast these comforts and luxuries with the hard lot of former priests he knows.

Leaving the priesthood is a tremendous economic sacrifice and risk even for a young, healthy, talented priest. It is infinitely more so for a priest in his forties or fifties or for one in poor health or with other physical disabilities. And, unfortunately, a priest usually is at least close to his forties when he begins to see the light.

The former priest finds himself alone in a strange world, cut off from friends and relatives, with no one to help him. He is faced with the task of remaking his life and finding a livelihood. He is faced in mid-life, for the first time, with the ordeal of earning his own living, with no previous experience in the hard struggle for existence to which other people are so accustomed. There is no one to whom he can turn for a recommendation. If he refers to his bishop, his character will be unscrupulously blasted. He has no trade, no profession, no special skill, no working experience of any kind. He is unable to account for the past ten or twenty years of his life without ruining his chances for employment—he is as helpless and stigmatized as if he had spent these years in jail. Protestants will often give him words of sympathy and admiration—but seldom try to get him a worthwhile job. By not a few loyal Protestants of the established churches he is regarded as a *persona non grata*, having offended against recognized religious conventions. To evangelical Protestants he becomes just an interesting “convert from Romanism”, and is liable soon to be forgotten. And so, wearied and discouraged, he must often walk a friendless path alone.

So isolated and helpless is an ex-priest that he cannot even get on relief rolls. To do this he must give his past history—and, if he does, he is referred back to his relatives in his home town.

Such is the plight of former priests. Christ's Mission is the one religious organization in the country with the distinctive aim of helping them. It helps them as much as it can—but this depends on the generosity of the friends of the Mission and the readers of our magazine. At present we have three former priests for whom we are still trying to find a decent job.

Letter From Dr. Murphy

The following letter is self-explanatory. We agree with Dr. Murphy in what he says about the “arrogance” of the Italian Church. Its appropriation of the name “Canadian” is on a par with its use of the word “Catholic”. Following is the letter:

Dear Dr. Shields:

After my return to New York I noticed the slur that occurred in the issue of *The Canadian Register* that came out after my visit to Toronto. (Isn't it amusing how nonchalantly the Catholics appropriate a national name like *The Canadian Register*. They will never fail for lack of arrogance.)

The fact that the Catholic press of Canada had to resort to the shabby trick of name-calling is striking proof of its intellectual bankruptcy. Unable to refute the arguments I advanced against the Catholic church, it had to resort to ridicule to cover its own embarrassment.

There are a few points in this twenty-line write-up to which I would like to call attention:

The Catholic church always claims, as it does in this article, that there are only a few priests who have left the priesthood. It knows that this is a deliberate lie, that there are hundreds and hundreds of former priests right in the United States alone. But it is the old story of the end justifying the means.

The very term featured by the Catholic press, “ex-priest”, is a contradiction of Catholic doctrine, since the Catholic church itself teaches that “once a priest always a priest.” But what is one more contradiction in the teaching of the church! It thrives on them.

You would think that the Catholic press would be ashamed to defend itself by dragging out the same time-worn libels it has been using for centuries. Even a high school boy could think of a more original term of abuse than “Judas Iscariot.”

What I want to call attention to is the fact that *The Canadian Register* did not dare to deny a single statement made in the newspaper advertisements concerning me. It openly admitted that I was a former priest. By its silence it admitted:

- that I was a priest in good standing and left of my own accord;
- that I have a doctorate of theology from a Roman Catholic university;
- that I worked at the Apostolic Delegation in Washington and with Archbishop Celso Costantini;
- that I was professor of dogmatic theology in the Catholic University of Peking.

The Canadian Register did not dare to deny one of the above statements. The most it dared to do was to quibble over the length of time I worked at the Apostolic Delegation in Washington and to try indirectly to cast doubts on my doctorate by saying that I was “billed” as Rev. Dr. J. J. Murphy.

When I read this Catholic sheet, I was surprised that it did not make the usual libels against me by saying that I was expelled from the priesthood and got married. Then the reason for its caution suddenly dawned on me: In attempting to identify me the Catholic bishop of Toronto obviously inquired from the Apostolic Delegate to Canada. He obviously certified that I was a priest and advised better-than-usual treatment. Why? Because I know Archbishop Antoniutti, the Apostolic Delegate to Canada, personally. As a matter of fact, the day I left Peking, China, he was at the station to see me off.”

Sincerely yours,

J. J. MURPHY.

**Subscribe for
The Gospel Witness
\$2.00 per year**